

JOSEPH CONRAD'S
LAST DAY

BY
RICHARD CURLE

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LOUISIANA COMRADES
EAST DAY

THE NEW CHAIR

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JOSEPH CONRAD'S LAST DAY

I HAVE written this short account of Joseph Conrad's last day because I was with him alone during his final hours of health and sat with him when he was dying, and I think it proper that a record should be made while a record is still possible. If I have touched upon his general characteristics it is because they, also, require to be put in their true perspective.

During twenty hours, it is true, he suffered grievously, but let us not forget that within one day and with no immediate foreboding he passed from full life into death and that his brain was unclouded to the end and his

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thought constantly for others. Moreover, the idea of death had no terrors for him. He was tired—not tired of life, but tired of the burden of living. His health had been so bad for many years and his nerves were so ceaselessly on the stretch that he felt worn out. But the flame of his mind made rest impossible—and sometimes he longed for rest. Only a few months ago he said to me after one of those sudden pauses which denoted a change in the orientation of his thoughts, ‘I shouldn’t be very sorry to be out of all this.’ I saw the distant expression in his eyes: it was a reverie brought up by some chance remark out of his sunken, abiding meditation.

He often spoke to me of his death as of an event not far off. He discussed the future, as wise men do discuss such things, with anxious solicitude for his

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family's welfare and with calm visualisation of his own end. And latterly I had begun to feel panics about him I had never felt before. There had come into his face at times a pinched look, a fallen-in look, which was horribly alarming and twice recently I had had shocks of acute fear.

Why write about all this? He died because his whole frame was exhausted by more than thirty years of auto-intoxication from that malarial gout contracted in the Congo in the early 'nineties and because his labours and his temperament allowed him no respite for recuperation. But he died in the ripeness of his achievement and we ought not to sorrow too much.

On what was harrowing I have dwelt as little as possible. All death is harrowing: and the death of such a man, so great in his genius and his

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personality, is, indeed, bitter to those who loved and admired him. But it had to be, and I have tried therefore to give a picture of Conrad himself in his ultimate hours of health and illness, which, while adhering to the truth, may yet console rather than distress.

His memory, so it seems to me, can only be enhanced and made more precious still amongst those who knew him by a straightforward narration of the facts.

It was about eleven when I arrived at Oswalds on the night of Friday, August 1st. The train from Victoria had been late owing to its being so near the Bank Holiday, and Conrad had not waited up for me, but was in bed, reading. I went straight to him and he told me to have some supper and then come upstairs to his room again for a talk. He always had supper waiting for me when I

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travelled by this train—he and his wife were infinitely thoughtful in small things as well as large—and I remember how, on that Friday night, he jokingly described to me what I would find below.

He delighted in hospitality. On his occasional visits to London his great pleasure was to entertain his friends and when at Oswalds he kept almost open house. When I used to arrive before lunch he would be there to greet me, coming out into the hall or calling from his study, and then, when the first words of welcome were over, he would say with that twinkling expansiveness that was all his own, ‘I know what you need—a drink,’ and he would press the bell.

When I had had supper I came and sat by his bedside. I had done it many, many times. Of recent years he had

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taken to going to bed earlier, and instead of talking in his study till one or two in the morning we used generally to finish the evening in his room, where, propped up by pillows, he would discourse at large with all his old illumination and brilliance.

He was a fascinating talker, profound, informed, with gleams in his deep-set eyes that were like the very mirror of his soul. At times he mused aloud, but he would listen as readily as he talked, quick to see your point, to embroider on it, to bring the play of his ideas into relation with yours. His mind had many layers, and sometimes he would jump from one to another without warning, which was disconcerting until one knew him well enough to follow intuitively. Indeed, it was only those who knew him intimately who ever really began to fathom the

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bewildering variety of that swift and incalculable intelligence.

There was a mysterious quality about Conrad, not histrionically but basically mysterious, which was endlessly exciting. I always had a sneaking sympathy for the visitor from overseas who came to call on him one day and kept repeating, between tense pauses, 'But how *did* you think of the plot of *Chance*?' It amused Conrad very much to repeat this story (though I expect the incident annoyed him at the time) : but after all, how did he? How *did* he think of these breathing people and immense horizons? What went on inside that extraordinary brain? Every now and then one would catch glimpses of the stirring pool, but I think beneath his dearest friendships there was a Conrad whom nobody had ever approached, a solitary and silent Conrad inexplicably

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removed from any human being. The deepest of all his layers lay far out of sight.

He appeared very well and in singularly good spirits. The fact that his wife was once more in the house—she had returned eight days previously from six weeks in a Canterbury nursing home—and his freedom from gout had a soothing effect on him, and his talk was full of vivacity.

Death, with its new finality, makes of the memory of even those we have loved most, a thing blurred, tenuous, and unreal, as though we could only catch by strained attention the faint echo of a song sung beautifully long ago; and that is the reason, I suppose, why so much that was said between us during those last hours will not return into my conscious thoughts. But I do recollect that he began by chaffing me, in his

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affectionate way, on having something up my sleeve.

‘You’re smiling! What is it? Have you any news for me?’ He was always like that—a friend who entered more into all one’s joys and sorrows, into the big things and the little, than any one I have ever known.

‘Well, Dick,’ he burst out all at once, ‘*I’ve* good news for you. I believe I’ve found a house.’

Conrad was naturally averse to long sojourn in one home. He had been five years at Oswalds, and, delightful though it was, it had begun to irk him. He was rather perturbed that a minimum lease of seven years would be required for the new house, but added that perhaps he would be able to sub-let it in three of four.

He was quite elated. They were leaving Oswalds, in any case, at the end

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of September, and the question of where to go had been worrying them all. It was his chauffeur, Vinten, who had recently discovered this other place, eight miles from Oswalds along the Dover Road, and Conrad had been over to inspect it a few days before.

‘I want to take you to see it to-morrow,’ he said to me, and he enlarged enthusiastically—but there were often underlying tinges even in his enthusiasm—upon its aspect, its rooms, its gardens, its garage. How pleased he was! If they were prepared to instal electric light he was prepared to pay so much more rent; what did I think of it? He went into minute details—how pleased and eager he was!

Then he switched off the subject of the house and began to talk to me about his fragment of a novel, *The Sisters*, eight or twelve thousand words in length,

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which had been put aside many years before. Would people care to see it, he wondered? And that led him to tell me about the preface he had just undertaken to write for a new volume of two of his plays. His mind was full of plans that night.

And then—apropos of an article in the current number of the *Times Literary Supplement*—he slipped into a kind of monologue about the Second Empire. As though he had been concerned in it himself, he discussed, with graphic asides, its tortuous policies and outstanding figures.

Conrad's knowledge of this period, as also of the first Napoleonic period, was unmatched within my experience, and he used to hold forth on the personalities and the moves with a grasp of motive and incident, with a running commentary laying bare the back-

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ground, which were astonishingly convincing.

It was part of his inbred unself-conscious courtesy that he always seemed to take it for granted that one knew as much as he did and had read all the obscure memoirs he had read—he was one of the widest-read men, one of the fastest and most tenacious readers I ever met—and when a subject really interested him he would talk on it for hours, winding into its ramifications and letting it bear him on gradually into reminiscence and by-paths that were enthralling in their disclosure of his own outlook and his own thoughts.

I don't know how long I sat with him, perhaps an hour and a half, and when I went to bed it was not only with no sense of anything wrong—I knew nothing then of the premonitory attack he had had a day or two before—but

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with a feeling that he was better than I had seen him for a considerable time.

Even when he had talked, as he did that evening, of the recent death of John Quinn, the American lawyer whose great collection of Conrad manuscripts had recently been dispersed, it did not come home to him with a reminder of his own mortality. 'They get such strange diseases,' he said, speaking at large. He had never actually met Quinn: it was not like the death of a close friend.

I went to bed, as I say, feeling quite happy about him, and at breakfast the next morning that feeling still continued. It is true that he informed me that he had not slept till four, but then he was always a poor sleeper, and he was so cheerful and apparently so well that I did not give it a serious thought.

We breakfasted alone. To those who

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know Conrad only from his books, who have formed from their lofty and often sombre pages a picture of the man himself as aloof and unapproachable, the real Conrad, the intimate Conrad of old friendships, would have been unbelievable. There was a zest of affectionate playfulness about him, perfect in its charm.

In many respects a mysterious and complex man, when he really made a friend he accepted him once and for all. Perhaps, as I have already suggested, nobody profoundly understood him, for, putting aside his lonely creative gift, there were in him deep strata of ironic melancholy, aristocratic contempt, and exasperated disillusionment, but it is certain that for the people for whom he cared he had a simplicity of affection which allowed for everything and overlooked all shortcomings.

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He had no trace of egotism in his relationships. Sometimes, when I have been sitting with him alone, he would apologise for what he called his dullness and would ask me whether I did not get bored being so much with him. As if anybody could ever have been bored in Conrad's presence ! For, apart, as it were, from his genius, there was a distinction and greatness about his personality which dominated every company in which he was and filled the room itself.

His friendship was whole-hearted. It was not given freely or widely in the fullest sense, but for those to whom it was so given he would have done anything. Such was his nature, such was the simple basis of his complex character.

His loyalty was touching in its indulgent completeness. He could not

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bear to see his friends unhappy : in any sorrow or difficulty he would support them, in any outside quarrel they were always in the right. What they had set their hearts on he tried to bring about ; if things went wrong—and he had a curious capacity for knowing changes without a word being said—he would wait his moment to remark, ‘Oh, well, my dear fellow, I always feared it would come to this, but I didn’t like to say anything : it is not worth your thinking about anyhow.’ I can hear his very tone, I can see the gesture of his dismissal, the indrawn pause, the sudden shrug of his shoulders and faint movement of his lips and hands. Finished ! Thus did he try to comfort one when in trouble and when action was useless. For when he could *do* anything, he did it.

Yes, he did it. I have known him,

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in the last years of his life, come straight up to London from Kent on purpose to see a friend who he thought was in distress. Ah! his voice comes back to me now—‘I am an old man and you might be my son. Why not see if I can do anything?’ Indeed, one had to be careful to keep one’s deeper worries from him. I have heard him say of things not even very desperate, ‘I was thinking all night about what you told me. It’s beastly that you should be bothered like this. It quite upset me.’

He could be alarming in the ferocity of his disdain or in his withering scorn, but his real friends were immune. Completely immune. He took them for granted and they were above criticism. They did not fatigue or annoy him, and in their company he seemed to expand with a sort of glow of which strangers

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and acquaintances can have had no perception.

After breakfast we went into his study and he began to talk to me of the novel he was then writing, *Suspense*, and of the article, *Legends*, he was just finishing.

‘My mind seems clearer than it has been for months,’ he said, ‘and I shall soon get hold of my work again.’ These were his words, ‘Soon get hold of my work again.’

He told me that he saw about six different lines of treatment which might be followed in *Suspense*, and of *Legends* he remarked that his hope was that it would develop naturally—this was to be one chapter—into a pendent volume to *The Mirror of the Sea*.

He did not mean a book precisely like *The Mirror*—that dealt rather with the seas he had known, this was to deal rather with the men he had sailed with.

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I could see his mind probing round the germ of his idea, as one often could see it while he spoke of his future work. I remember the opening of an unwritten novel he once described to me—the lighted palace, the sentries in the snow outside: a picture which has remained with me for years.

He was marvellously vital, and, if it had not been for his gouty cough, which struck me as rather more troublesome than usual, better apparently than he had been for ages.

He rose and went to his table and I took up the morning paper. He worked with concentration, without speaking, on something or other, and when at last, at eleven, the car was announced and he got up, I saw lying on his blotter the unfinished page 12—the whole article he had told me on the previous evening would have run to about 17 pages—of *Legends*.

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He talked animatedly in the car. He was looking forward to getting into his new home and was hoping I would approve his choice.

‘We won’t be able to entertain the Governor so finely there,’ he said, affectionately—he always called his old friend, Sir Hugh Clifford, Governor of Nigeria, ‘the Governor’—‘still we shall be able to manage it all right.’

We had gone about four miles when suddenly he passed his hand across his chest. ‘I feel that pain I had a few days ago,’ he said.

I suggested turning back, but he wouldn’t hear of it. ‘No, I dare say it’s nothing. I want you to see the place.’

But I saw that he was not well, and again I suggested turning back.

‘No, no, I don’t want to frighten Jessie.’

‘I’m sure you won’t frighten her,

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Conrad, and I can see the house to-morrow. Do let us turn back.'

This time he yielded, and the car was headed for Oswalds. We had been within a mile and a half of our destination.

'Ah! I feel better,' he exclaimed. 'But perhaps it was as well. One does not know what it'll do next. Look, she's running at thirty-five!'

The relief was only momentary and he was obviously suffering when we regained his home.

He sat down on the settee in the hall and swallowed some hot water. It was draughts of hot water which had seemed to help him during his former attack.

After a few minutes he went to his room, and presently he had me fetched. He was sitting up in his bed and decidedly easier.

'The walk upstairs did me good,' he remarked.

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But that, again, was only a temporary relief, and he soon gave instructions for his own doctor from Ashford to be telephoned for.

‘I am glad you are here with me,’ he said, and added words about our friendship, beautiful and moving to remember. I sat with him a long time.

The doctor arrived early in the afternoon ; he did not see him in one of his paroxysms of breathlessness, and the pulse was good. The pains shooting from one portion of his body to another resembled those of an acute indigestion. The doctor felt no disquietude. He made a careful examination, said cheering words, and left a prescription and instructions for a diet.

Conrad sent for me again. The paroxysms and the pains seemed to be increasing—‘it’s here—no, it’s at the back—no, now it’s going down my arm’

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—and the intervals of ease were getting less.

‘I don’t like it,’ he said gravely, in one of the pauses, ‘I’ve been so free from gout lately. I don’t like these symptoms,’ and he made an ominous, vague gesture.

Next door, Mrs. Conrad, unable to move, was lying on a couch and I had tea there with her. During tea, a telegram arrived to say that Lady Colvin, a very old friend of the Conrads, was dead.

Conrad called out, ‘Who is that telegram from?’—he had heard the bell.

‘It’s about Lady Colvin,’ his wife called back.

‘Is she better?’

‘No, not better,’ answered his wife.

Conrad made no response.

Even then, unconscious though I was of anything really serious, his silence

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came to me with a sort of pang. It was as if he had not dared to inquire further.

About eight o'clock his two sons, his eldest son's wife, and his little grandson of six months arrived by motor from London. They had not been specially summoned—nobody realised the danger—but had come down by arrangement to spend the Bank Holiday at home. Conrad insisted on his daughter-in-law and his grandson being brought to his bedside at once; there must be no delay—it was, indeed, as though he knew that it was his last chance of seeing them.

His breathing had become intermittently very bad, and a doctor—a stranger, his wife's doctor was away—was summoned from Canterbury, which is only about four and a half miles from Oswalds, as against Ashford's sixteen; but this doctor, too, having regard to

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the excellence of the pulse, was not alarmed, though he ordered cylinders of oxygen to be sent out from Canterbury Hospital to relieve the spasms.

It was impossible, after the repeated assurances of these two skilled doctors (who must have been misled by symptoms that on previous occasions had meant little), to believe that there was anything very seriously the matter. Even his dreadful fighting for breath was assumed by all of us to have its origin in violent asthmatic indigestion, and when he panted out in one of his gasping fits that he couldn't get better, we, having seen him so often in illness and despondency, did not take the words at their full value. But, throughout his life, he had been a man of few illusions, and I think perhaps he was under no illusion then. Heaven knows: possibly the struggle wrung it from him, as strange words,

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sometimes prophetic and sometimes not, are wrung from those in agony.

But his thoughtfulness for others, which was always so evident, did not desert him. When, later in the evening, his younger son and I were in his room, he begged us to leave so that we should not have the pain of seeing him suffer. 'Go away, dear boys, I can't bear you to see me like this.'

There was nothing more I could do, though, indeed, I had done nothing. I went to bed with no actual forebodings of a crisis, but with a gloom I could not shake off.

The night passed as the day. He got out of bed and insisted on sitting up in his chair, dozing off for a few minutes at a time. At six in the morning he seemed to be in less difficulty and told his eldest son that he must see about getting a male nurse, as Foote,

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his faithful manservant, was worn out after twenty hours of attendance. He was full of consideration and gratitude and said how finely Foote had behaved.

Later, I spoke to Foote, who told me that the night had not been a very good one, but that Mr. Conrad now appeared easier. (He had just previously called out jokingly to his wife, to relieve her anxiety, 'I'm better this morning. I can always get a rise out of you'). It was as though a load had been taken off my heart. Not long after, his eldest son rushed in to fetch me. Everything was over.

At the actual moment of death nobody was in the room. Foote had gone out with a message and Conrad was resting. There was no particular anxiety, for only half an hour before his pulse had been taken by Mrs. Vinten, who was a trained

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nurse, and found to be normal. His devoted and heroic wife, lying powerless next door, heard a cry, 'Here . . .' as if a second word had been stifled, and a fall. People ran in: he had slipped, dead, on to the floor from his chair. It was just on eight-thirty.

He looked incredibly noble and splendid. All the ravage and pain had ebbed from his features, and absolute aloofness and calm were written there. Yes, and a kind of haughty indifference which brought out startlingly the classic grandeur of his face.

To me it was as if I had never seen him till then. So absorbed—he did not want any of us any more. I gazed at him, not for long, but intently, and then I went away. I felt quite frozen.

He was at rest after suffering and I have thought of some words out of *The Mirror of the Sea* which appear to me touchingly

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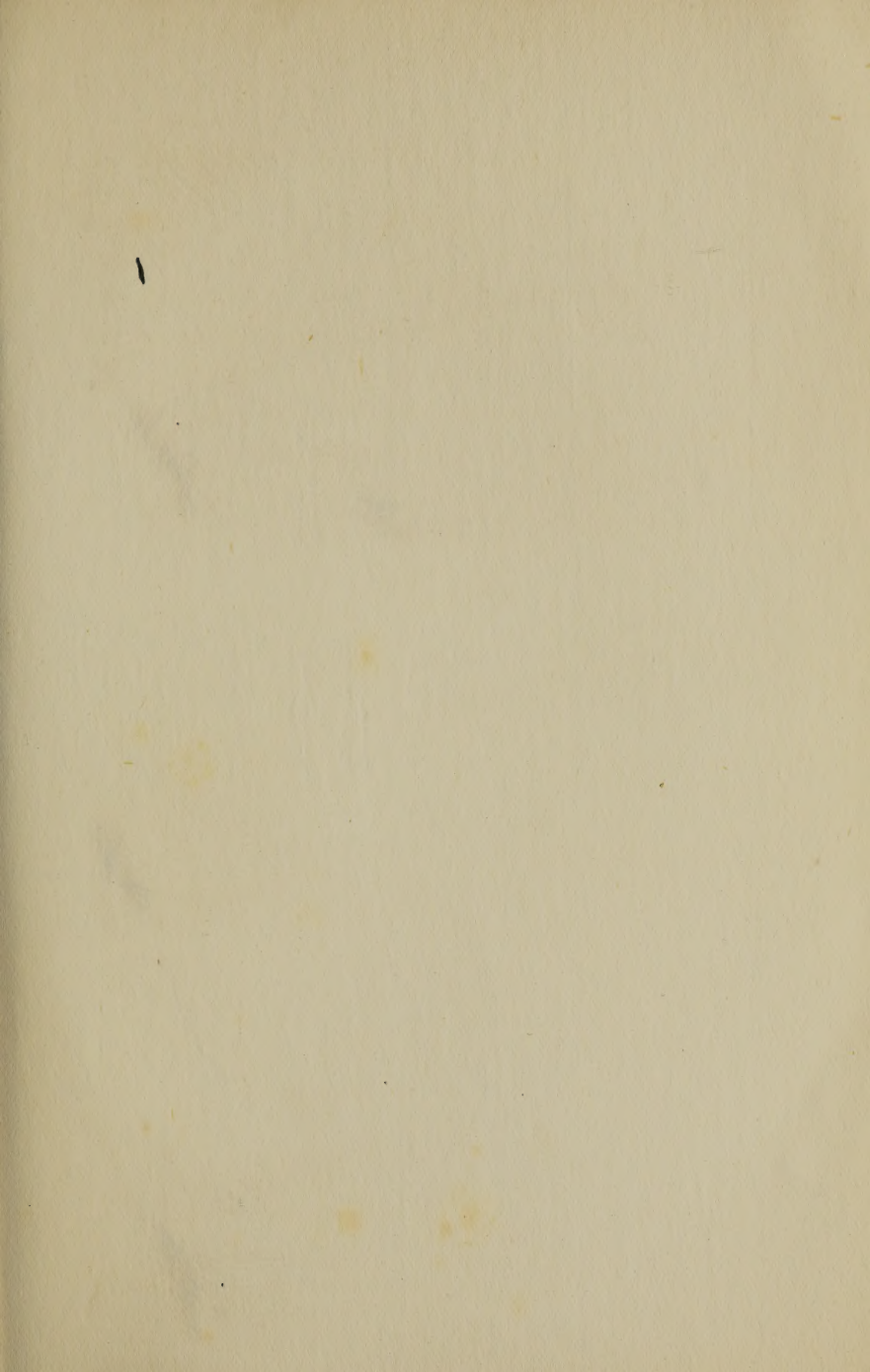
appropriate to the passing of his great spirit :

‘Nobody can say with what thoughts, with what regrets, with what words on their lips they died. But there is something fine in the sudden passing away of these hearts from the extremity of struggle and stress and tremendous uproar—from the vast unrestful rage of the surface to the profound peace of the depths, sleeping untroubled since the beginning of ages.’

I could not bear to look on him again in death, who for so many years had shown me all the tenderness of a father, whose infinite understanding and unbroken friendship had meant so much to my happiness, but I am assured that gradually the marks of age and weariness faded from his face and that his hair looked strangely black. It was as though youth had returned to him

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at last to stay with him for ever and comfort him even in the grave. And this is fitting—is it not?—for his works are inspired with the genius of immortal youth and his personality never grew old, never hardened, never ceased to be young in compassion and generosity.



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